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A Critique of Singaporean Internal Tertiary Education Programmes offered by Private Colleges: A Brief Comparison with Ireland

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Abstract

Singapore has a similar population to Ireland and gross domestic products (GDPs) for both countries are comparable. However, culturally and in other respects, the two republics are very different. Unemployment in Ireland is six times higher than in Singapore where GDP has almost doubled since 2007 but has fallen by nearly 11% in Ireland in the same time-span. One aspect of life in both countries transcending cultural differences is the importance placed on tertiary education. The Irish and Singaporean people share a deep commitment to education and the imperative of building and maintaining a knowledge economy is central to both societies. Employment in higher education in Singapore is more tenuous than in Ireland and it is common for a lecturer who is considered to have underperformed to not have a contract renewed. Irish higher education adheres closely to European policies and practices, particularly in adoption of quality assurance procedures. Consequently, it is expected that similar bachelor degree programmes in Ireland, for example in Mechanical Engineering or Physics, will be quality assured to a consistent standard across the higher education system. Quality assurance (QA) differs markedly in both states. For instance, QA in the National University of Singapore (NUS) is typically managed by internal committees, augmented by 'Visiting Committees'. The multitude of courses offered by private colleges in partnership with UK universities are subject to the QA procedures of the respective universities and hence are regulated by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

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However, an internal tertiary programme may or may not follow a strict QA procedure. If it does, the QA policies are drafted by the institution's staff and are based on the requirements of Singapore's Council of Private Education (CPE). Hence it is possible that the standard set may be inconsistent with the standard demanded by overseas QA regulations. In cases where QA procedures are not implemented, there can be little confidence among stakeholders in respect of the quality of the programme and standards may be arbitrary. Quality assurance of Irish higher education is coordinated through Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), a state body responsible for the review of institutions who usually operate their own quality assurance systems. In some cases, QQI takes direct responsibility for quality assurance within smaller institutions, while also taking direct responsibility in other education sectors, such as the further education sector. There is a widely held perception amongst stakeholders in higher education in Singapore that internal programmes in tertiary education offer lower quality than the external tertiary programmes which are affiliated to well-established, mainly British, universities. Many factors have influenced this view, leading to its reinforcement and wide acceptance. These factors are discussed here and a simple but telling case study is offered. The practices of private colleges running their own internal Diploma and Advanced Diploma programmes are evaluated by observing specific situations. Comparisons are made with similar practices of colleges that run external Diploma and Advanced Diploma programmes under the auspices of UK universities and practices followed in private colleges and institutes of technology in Ireland. In conclusion, the need for uniform quality procedures across the Singaporean higher education system is highlighted and some necessary steps in achieving this requirement are advanced.

Keywords: External Examiners, Moderation, Quality Assurance, Tertiary Education

Introduction

The ultimate purpose of the research partially described here is to offer a model of improved Quality Assurance (QA) in Singaporean private colleges based on international practice.

Hence, the specific research question posed in this paper is:

Are there QA procedures that are routinely applied in the Irish IOTs and private colleges that could bring about improvements if implemented in Singaporean private colleges?

Consequently, the particular objective addressed in this text is:

To seek improvements in the quality of HE programmes in Singaporean private colleges by reference to the QA procedures in the Irish private and IOT sectors.

The research underpinning this text was gleaned from the personal experience of academics in Singapore and Ireland, interviews with academic managers and staff in Singaporean private colleges following agreed procedures, information supplied by external examiners and reference to relevant papers, articles and publications.

Superficially it could be thought that Ireland and Singapore are alike in terms of development and wealth generation; they have similar populations, in 2013 there were 5.4 million Singaporeans and 4.6 million people lived in the Irish Republic; Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) per capita were respectively approximately US\$ 55,200 and US\$ 47,400. However, GDP in Ireland fell by approximately 17% between 2008 and 2014 while GDP in Singapore leapt by nearly 40% over the same period. Markedly, unemployment in Ireland stood at almost 11% in 2014 compared with the negligible level of slightly under 2% in Singapore. The Ministry of Education in Singapore stated in their report titled *Education Statistics Digest 2014* that the intake of students into Higher education in Singapore in 2013 was 63,624. This number only accounts for full time students in universities, polytechnics,

LASALLE College of the Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA) and the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), so excludes the smaller private colleges. In the same year, there were 54,937 graduates from these LASALLE, NAFA and ITE. The Central Statistics Office of Ireland reported an overall intake of 169,254 students in higher education for 2013. The economic success of Singapore is mirrored by its success in higher education, but the high quality exhibited by some institutions and programmes is not matched by all. Though much of the tertiary provision is excellent, there are concerns that will be examined here.

The higher education sector worldwide offers students an almost unlimited range of disciplines at a range of academic levels. This is often as a result of the numerous programmes provided by various reputed universities from Europe or the USA to private or affiliated colleges where indigenous education programmes are less well developed or varied. Now that this form of higher education is ubiquitous, prospective employers are bound to scrutinise and question the quality of the degrees obtained by graduates from private colleges. There is a higher chance of being rejected for a job if you are a graduate who holds a degree from a private college which runs its own internal programmes. In *The Strait Times*, November 2014, Manpower Minister, Tan Chuan-Jin warned that Singapore may be faced with graduate unemployment if more young people enrol in institutions with questionable standards. He also suggested that private schools must evaluate whether their graduates obtain graduate-level jobs or are effectively underemployed. Moreover, he speculated on how employers rated graduates from private colleges and what starting salaries the graduates achieved.

Obstacles to employment exist despite the programmes being recognised by national quality assessment boards. Even though there are private colleges in Singapore that provide quality

education, there are a few factors that have contributed strongly to the belief that programmes solely devised and run internally by private colleges do not meet the same quality standards as the programmes that are offered or overseen by reputed universities. These factors are examined in detail in this paper.

There are a number of colleges in Singapore that are well known for the standard and quality of the courses they offer. The courses may be provided and monitored by foreign universities of acknowledged standard and frequently these courses are also operated by several other colleges around the world. Often, the providing university is highly placed in recognised international university rankings, as commented on by Focus Singapore (Focus Singapore n.d.). Alternative courses commonly offered by these colleges are their internal diplomas and advanced diplomas. These are usually self-designed and articulated by the colleges themselves.

The group of academics responsible for the design and delivery of the programmes sensibly base the syllabi on market and industry standard requirements allied to the expectations of academia that are enshrined in national quality standards. Many highly regarded private colleges like the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS), the PSB Academy, EASB, Auston Institute of Singapore, the TMC Academy, Kaplan and BMC offer a wide range of foreign university degrees in management, business and engineering disciplines. A few of these colleges also offer internal diploma and advanced diploma courses which are in turn feeder programmes for the individual foreign university degrees that the various institutes deliver. Clearly, if these courses are ineffective, students may well founder when they undertake university degrees provided from overseas. It is clear that if large numbers graduating from private colleges in Singapore do not attain the same levels of

learning as their university counterparts, then competitiveness at home and reputation abroad are threatened.

Comparisons between Irish and Singaporean Tertiary Education

Some simple statistics for Irish and Singaporean education for 2014, gleaned from the NationMaster website, are quoted in Table 1. The data is not interrogated here but is intended to inform the arguments made in the paper.

Areas of Comparison	Ireland	Singapore
College and university > Share of total education spending.	22.22% Ranked 43 rd	38.04% Ranked 1 st 71% more than Ireland
Compulsory education in years	10 Ranked 71 st 67% more than Singapore	6 Ranked 157 th
Government spending on education as a proportion of GDP	6.47% Ranked 23 rd	3.23% Ranked 13 th
Literacy > Female	99% Ranked 25 th 10% more than Singapore	89.7% Ranked 75 th
Literacy > Male	99% Ranked 35 th 2% more than Singapore	96.7% Ranked 53 rd
Literacy > Total population	99% Ranked 26 th 6% more than Singapore	93.2% Ranked 68 th
Tertiary enrolment	47.5% Ranked 26 th 41% more than Singapore	33.7% Ranked 3 rd

Table 1 Some simple comparisons between Irish and Singaporean education for 2014

Perceptions of Programmes Provided in Private or Affiliated Singaporean Colleges

The negative factors that are considered to diminish the quality of programmes offered by private colleges and additionally significantly sway society's perception of them are:

- Recruitment of students whose grades do not qualify for entry at tertiary education level.
- Graduating students achieving unrealistically high grades in almost all subjects.
- Evaluation comprising only coursework assessments rather than also including examinations.
- Curriculum Design that is not evaluated or validated by external universities or any other external body.

Undoubtedly the potential for diminution of the quality of programmes and the perceptions this engenders can have a marked influence on the success of the programmes and can ultimately detrimentally affect financial viability.

Recruitment of Students with Poor Grades

In order to sustain their competitive advantage, many private colleges operating in Singapore today are inclined to set targets for profit as a priority over a requirement for the delivery of quality education. Singapore, which is a hub for education for many Asian countries, attracts a huge student population in the tertiary education sector, where 180,000 students had enrolled in 300 private colleges in 2013 (CPE, 2014). The gross enrolment ratio of tertiary students of both genders shows an increase from 71% in 2010 to 82% in 2013, an indication that the number of students in Higher Education in Singapore is increasing (Government Data Singapore, 2013). As in a few other countries, Singapore has enthusiastically promoted internationalisation by inviting reputed foreign universities to establish local campuses offering education programmes to local students and also to form an education hub in their

area (Albach, 2009). Often, students prefer to join a private college to complete their Diploma and Advanced Diploma level studies before moving on to universities in the UK, Australia or the US. This provides a method of reducing the cost to them of the first two levels of a full bachelor degree programme. It can be demonstrated that admission to private colleges for students is easily obtained, even though many of the students have scored relatively badly in their high school examinations. A basic search of the websites of many private colleges reveals questionable entry requirement for their internal programmes, for example, in one case the entry requirement for Higher Diploma in Computer Science, completion of 12 years of formal education from a recognised institution, is all that is required. However, for NUS, the entry requirements are very specific and demanding as stated in their admissions regulations (National University of Singapore, Office of Admissions). As Singaporean universities do not need to accept students with low levels of attainment, the private colleges are generally compelled to exploit this market and this policy paradoxically acts as a selling point for the private colleges, allowing them to increase revenue from the recruitment. The compromise on quality that is made at this point has repercussions for all aspects of the teaching programmes, leading to a diminution in academic rigour whilst forcing those responsible for curriculum development to drop their standards and lower academic expectations. The diminution in standards can be as a result of:

- a conscious decision to dilute modules and programmes
- a culmination of external or self-induced pressure to show acceptable marks for weak cohorts
- a subconscious move to lower standards as the quality of student ability at intake declines

It must be questioned if this short-term strategy can safeguard an institution's future, is remotely justifiable in terms of the graduates produced or acceptable in terms of the consequences for the labour market. Toh (2012) put forward the view that the rapid growth of the private education sector in the state had led to an uneven quality of education provision. This uneven quality in turn has negatively affected the overall quality of the delivery of education to a point that lower standards become accepted as the norm and further reductions in academic standards are less likely to be questioned.

Graduating Students Achieving Unrealistically High Grades

It has become common for students in many private colleges to easily obtain grades in the higher marks range. This can be attributed to two major causes:

- assignments and examinations are not of the requisite difficulty and
- assignments and examinations are either not subjected to a moderation process or an inadequate moderation process is applied.

It can be argued that even when these two causes are absent, the overall standards accepted for the programmes are considerably below those demanded in universities. This situation is perpetuated because of the necessity to maintain and increase pass rates. When it occurs, moderation of an assignment set by a lecturer is carried out by another lecturer who belongs to the same department and is subject to the same working pressures. It is rare for the moderation to exhibit rigour or for an external moderator to be involved. Hence, unless the lecturer and moderator comply with the requirement for a qualitative assessment for evaluation purposes, the marks and grades are unlikely to be realistic and in fact this is usually confirmed by them failing to be contained within the profile of the bell curve that can usually be anticipated when work is pitched at the appropriate level.

All UK universities are audited by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which is the independent agency in Britain for higher education institutes that ensures appropriate standards and quality are established and maintained in the delivery of tertiary programmes. The Quality Code sets out standards that higher education institutes are expected to meet. External moderation processes are detailed to an extent that ensures assessments are of a standard that inordinately high distinction grades are not awarded to an unrealistic number of students. The assignments and examination scripts are moderated prior to them being given to students and the work submitted by students for marking is moderated by external moderators after initial and second (or possibly even third) marking.

The purpose in moderating the assignments that are set is to determine their validity and whether they are at the appropriate level relative to the (international) standard which the students are expected to attain. When questions are considered to be either too simple or too difficult, changes are requested from the lecturer who originally set the assignment or examination paper. To a large extent, this process ensures assessments that will test students fairly and at an appropriate standard. Following the setting of an assignment or examination, it is normally scrutinised by an internal moderator, before being sent to the external examiner for comments. It must be borne in mind that external examiners act in an advisory capacity, but it is imprudent to ignore the advice they give. Scripts completed and submitted by students are blind marked by module lecturers and as stated, second or even third marked internally prior to them being moderated by the external examiner. This process is manifestly robust and tends to deliver an acceptable distribution of marks consistent with a bell curve profile. Consequently, the grades are distributed such that lesser numbers of High Distinctions and Distinctions, possibly fewer Credits and hopefully many Pass grades are in evidence. Also, there is an expectation that there will be fewer students obtaining Fail grades.

This situation alleviates pressure on examination boards to arbitrarily adjust marks. Professor Miller advanced a crucial and perceptive point, questioning whether educators give grades or assign them. In his article, *‘What does it mean to curve grades?’* he also demonstrates the normal distribution obtained for 422 students in an example of good practice (Miller, 2009) and this clarifies the concept of grading on the curve. The point made is that most educators suggest that the results should “fit” the curve, and where there is a skew to either sides, deviating from normal distribution, grades are adjusted, which is not welcomed by students. Further grade inflation and its detrimental consequences are also discussed by Miller.

Alexander Stanoyevitch, a professor of mathematics at California State University, has written in the NEA Higher Education Journal about the long-term effects of grade inflation on individual institutes, where a decline in academic standing leads to a diminution in reputation. He refers to such institutions as ‘degree mills’. The NUS provost in his blog also argues against the practice of grade adjustments (NUS Provost, 2012).

Though the Private Education Institute’s (PEI’s) regulating body in Singapore, the CPE, oversees and ensures the quality of all colleges in Singapore, a moderation process as robust and rigorous as that applied in the UK or Ireland is not in place or considered mandatory for compliance in colleges. It is disturbing that points can be awarded in CPE audits of PEIs without these or similarly effective quality measures being in place.

Evaluations Comprising Coursework Assessments

It is self-evident that certain subjects are best assessed by coursework only, whereas a judicious combination of coursework and examination is better suited to others. In keeping with most international universities, private colleges in Singapore employ assessments of

student learning outcomes comprising of at least two components; often an examination and at least one assignment. However, it is not mandatory to have such an assessment pattern.

This is convenient for many private colleges, who set their own modes of assessment ranging from one to three components of assessments, including examinations or class tests, or all of the assessment in the form of ‘take home’ assignments wherein maintaining standards is more challenging.

When students are only required to undertake such assignments, it is unsurprisingly difficult to obtain results that:

- i) strictly fall within a bell curve
- ii) avoid collusion between students
- iii) do not comprise of marks for answers that are formulaic and consequently lack originality or insight
- iv) exhibit any measurable learning outcomes.

Plagiarism and collusion are difficult to detect in such circumstances. Additionally, much of the information gleaned from the internet is contradictory, highly variable and of dubious credibility (Metzger, *et al.*, 2003, p.273). Students who are originally not selected through a rigorous process and consequently are unlikely to be critical thinkers, may resort to copying information from the internet and pasting it into their scripts, often without making any changes or questioning the reliability or context of the information. Errors and superficiality were illustrated by Banu & Jerrams (2012) who evaluated scripts of students on an Engineering Management programme who had misunderstood the sourcing policies of multinational companies by accessing scant material from the internet. It was also clear that the students’ answers were tailored to align with the opinions offered by their lecturer. In doing so, students will often violate copyright and many private colleges running internal

programmes still lack the software or any other system to identify plagiarism. Hence, it is left to the ability and vigilance of the marker to identify the authenticity of written reports.

For academic programmes that employ the moderation processes normally used in UK (or Irish) universities; where the external examiner moderates enough papers representing a range of scripts that have been chosen through a fair, credible and transparent process, the moderator is enabled to make sound judgments in regard of the marking. This provides the capability of checking if markers have been reasonable and consistent in awarding marks. The external examiner can determine if there is a proper justification for the award of marks.

In this situation, the tendency for the marks of the entire cohort to comply with a bell curve is high. The adherence to a bell curve is widely considered to offer a system that best governs the awarding of marks in a fair way, where it is usual for the cohort to have fewer distinctions and credits, many marks tending to the average and fewer that are categorised as poor. The use of the normal distribution in classroom grading to measure student achievement has been discussed by prominent researchers like Arthur Jensen, Richard Heurnstein, and Charles Murray (Marzano, 2000) and considered to be necessary. The tendency for scores to conform to a normal distribution has been evaluated by Jensen, who noted that the grades could fall roughly on a normal distribution even if the tests were not designed to generate grades resulting in a bell curve distribution.

An example, though only offering a snapshot of procedures and outcomes within Singaporean colleges, is given here. Figure 1 depicts the marks of an Advanced Diploma module that was evaluated from assignments only (100% coursework). The information depicted in the figure (and in Figure 2) was made available by the programme manager

responsible for the module and is indicative of his desire to improve quality in the module delivery. The anonymity of the college and personnel was respected. The module assessment comprises a quantitative paper and two of the assessments set were 'take-home' assignments. As a quantitative paper was set with more than 80% of questions requiring calculations, so expectations of answers generated from mere substitution of formulae were to be expected. It is therefore likely that the lecturer was particularly proactive with the students while setting the coursework. However, in terms of the credibility of the module, the outcome clearly illustrates that the process was weak and the students' marks untenable. The results for the cohort of thirty-three students identified fifteen High Distinction grades. This situation was manifestly unacceptable and the pre examination board appointed a moderator to scale down the marks through second stringent marking.

Figure 2 shows the outcome of second marking of all of the scripts and represents an attempt to be fair to the entire cohort. Obviously, the possibility of obtaining fairness for all the students (and students on similar courses) was already unlikely and even after adjustment, marks were far too high. In this specific case, since the programme management was committed to maintaining academic standards, it is likely that the lecturer had been irresponsible in respect of delivering the module and problems were inevitably identified at a later stage. Equally, it is accepted that situations exist where institutional pressure can be applied to improve pass rates by driving down standards. If the assessment questions were initially moderated in detail, the final outcome would not have shown a considerable improvement because the nature of the assignment and the teaching and learning process were flawed. This particular case is a stark example of the impossibility of being fair to students once too difficult or too simple assignments have been set. An attempt to rectify the original problem is totally undermined by:

- i) an inability to determine if the students would have been capable of meeting learning objectives if the assessment had been pitched at the correct level
- ii) not knowing if teaching of the module was adequate.

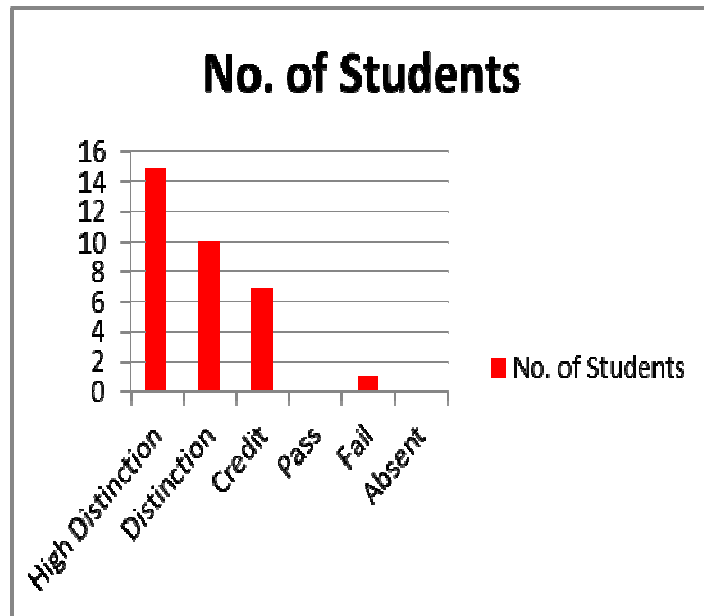


Figure 1 Distribution of grades skewed towards the right as a result of using only assessments for evaluation

(This is an outcome that occurred in an Advanced Diploma level module in a private tertiary college. The anonymity of the college has been respected).

In the process of external moderation, as practiced by all the universities under the guidelines of the QAA, the external examiners also verify whether the assessment questions are pitched at the right level as per Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). This process of verification helps to differentiate students who are critical thinkers (and hence are capable of critical arguments) from those whose answers are seen to be superficial and lack in-depth analysis. Regrettably, it is not normal for external examiners to be appointed by private colleges for cost reasons.

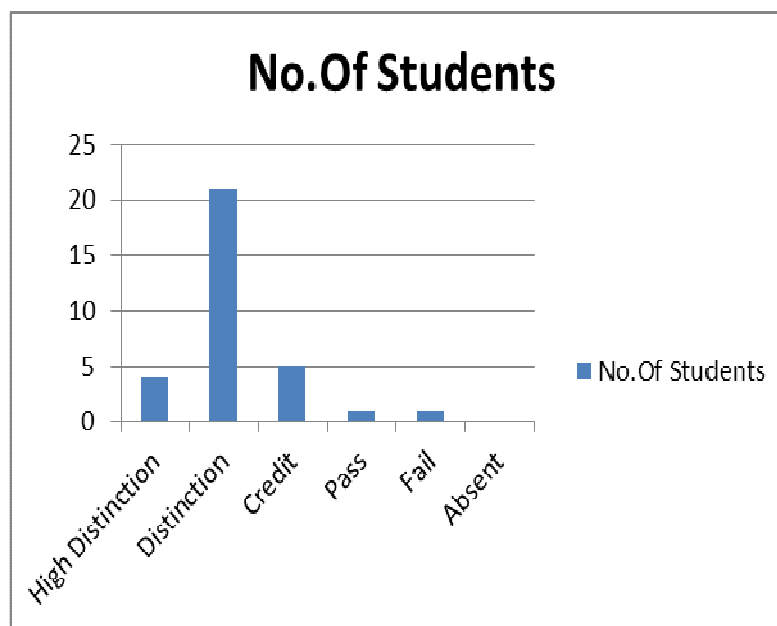


Figure 2 Distribution of grades, after moderation of scripts in an attempt to obtain grades consistent with a bell curve (Again, the anonymity of the college has been respected.)

Lack of evaluation or validation of Curriculum Design

In many private colleges, the internal programmes' modules and the educational content in a particular discipline are decided and prepared by the academic departments that offer the programmes. To a great extent, the content of the modules are designed to meet industry's current trends and needs. However, there is a major weakness here. The completed design, both in terms of subject content and assessment, is not validated by any external body or university. The CPE in Singapore gives approval to run a course, for which it requires information from the provider. However, the CPE only requires the name of the validator of the course, *if applicable*, as stated on the CPE website, under the section '*Seeking permission to Offer Courses (CPE)*' (2013). This allows individual modules to be delivered at a lower standard than called for by those who originally specified the programme. For example, though a well-regarded private college offers its own Diploma and Advanced Diploma programmes and module content has been developed based on the college's own descriptors,

the responsibility for teaching the elements in the module in line with the learning objectives reside in the hands of the individual module lecturers. Similarly, the assessment methods for the module are solely developed by the lecturer and thereafter they are internally moderated. Of course, the inherent weakness in this is that the assessment plan may not be seen or validated by any external validators, so no external moderation has taken place. Again, the likelihood of delivering the course at the required standard is greatly compromised, but encouragingly, retrospective validation has just been introduced.

Quality in Irish Private Colleges and Institutes of Technology

Irish private colleges - Are there lessons for Singaporean private higher education?

In the last year there have been reminders that private higher education colleges worldwide have garnered heavy criticism. For example, when questioned by the Public Accounts Committee in the UK parliament, the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills reported that 23 private colleges had their designation suspended in November 2013 (Morgan, 2014). This situation is mirrored elsewhere and more recently in Canada the news of Everest College's closure in Ontario did not surprise some former students and teachers. Allegations were made that records were skewed to keep incompetent pupils in class; on some programmes more than half of the students should not have been selected for the course of study and some of these were incapable of doing examinations. Providing retakes and 'bumping up' marks ultimately allowed incompetent students to pass. On other programmes, non-attenders could still achieve progression and completion. It was also alleged that failing students were passed after being given 'make-up tests' not set by the class lecturer (Harris, 2015).

Private colleges in Ireland are subject to considerable scrutiny and the recent judicial ruling that unaccredited private providers can continue to accept non-EU immigrants without meeting Accreditation and Coordination of English Language Services (ACELS) standards is indicative of tensions in private tertiary education (Custer, 2015). Numerous private higher education colleges in Ireland are accredited by QQI. The problems experienced by the American College Dublin in September 2010 draw parallels with some private Singaporean colleges. QQI's predecessor, HETAC, highlighted a series of institutional failures at the College and recommended thirty-seven changes. A reprimand was given for the college calling itself the 'Irish American University' and it was suggested that the college lacked vision and had questionable financial viability.

However, in terms of making a comparison, poor quality assurance controls are significant. A panel of experts visited the college for a pre-arranged institutional review after the college had promised action on the requested recommendations, but the college failed to provide a single external stakeholder able to comment on the establishment's QA. Similarly, the college was unable to provide key international recruitment staff. Also, the college claimed that it had been accredited by the American agency, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, but it was in the process of seeking this accreditation. It was said that *"quality assurance appeared to be more a regulatory compliance chore rather than something embedded at all levels in the culture of the organisation"*. Pointedly, the visiting panel expressed concern at the lack of quality improvement instruments such as external examiner feedback forms which were short and contained weak questions. Six private language colleges closed in Ireland between May and August in 2014 and it is apparent that private tertiary education in the republic is unlikely to inform improvements in private higher education in Singapore. In this light, it is worth evaluating QA in Irish IOTs.

Quality Assessment of Programmes in Irish Institutes of Technology

Ireland's national quality systems and institutional quality systems are informed by the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, a Europe-wide standardisation initiative which provides guidance for Quality Assurance internal to institutions and for the external review of institutions. QQI carry out five yearly reviews of institutions to evaluate the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems. The policies and procedures of ESG are meant to give public confidence in the autonomy of institutions. The guidelines under the ESG for higher education emphasise that institutions must explicitly commit to the purpose of continuous quality enhancement.

Quality Assurance in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)

The ESG address the quality assurance of assessment in higher education (European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA)). With regard to assessments, Section 1.3 of the ESG is relevant, particularly the recommendation that institutions “*where possible, (do) not rely on the judgements of single examiners*”. In the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and throughout the Institute of Technology (IOT) sector, this primarily relates to the employment of external examiners on courses leading to awards (Section 4.7 Handbook for Quality Enhancement, Dublin Institute of Technology). Conversely, the UK's QAA additionally places considerable emphasis on direct internal moderation, where coursework and examinations are reviewed by a second member of staff with expertise in the specific discipline. This difference has been highlighted in DIT by external examiners from the UK on numerous occasions. In Ireland, practice tends to be for the examiner to return marks, for the external examiner to review coursework and examination material and for progression and award boards to identify anomalous situations that may raise concern. Hence, internal

QA in the institution, for example provided by the College Boards, monitors performance and distribution of awards at a high level to identify outliers and anomalies.

It is a requirement of quality assurance in DIT that external examiners review “*the assessed work of a Program leading to an award of the Institute in order to provide an annual peer judgement on the standards achieved at the completion of the Programme*”. This is interpreted as meaning that external examiners will review all work, coursework and examination material, if it contributes to an award grade, generally in the award year. In most cases, external examiners will also be employed for other years of the Programme and increasingly multiple years of programmes contribute to the award grade and thus require external examination.

While QAA probably has the most established QA system in Europe, it is not without its critics. In some ways, Ireland has benefitted from coming to the implementation of quality procedures later than the UK and has not replicated all the practices of the UK in some aspects of QA. Harvey (2006) has been critical of the bureaucratic nature of the UK quality systems and the reliance on Bloom’s Taxonomy and outcome measurement, favouring the development of a transformative culture within Higher Education with respect to the development of students.

While the Irish system is very much founded on an outcomes based approach (thanks largely to the Bologna process and the so-called Dublin Descriptors which defined the requirements for each of the cycles of higher education in terms of outcomes; and the National Framework of Qualifications which defined all levels of education in Ireland in terms of outcomes), its alternative approach to moderation and review of assessment is probably more suitable for an

overworked, under-pressure higher education environment. Some of the criticism of the UK system may suggest that the constant pursuit of documentary evidence leads to a box-ticking culture. This is also suggested for the Irish system.

DIT's Quality Assurance System (Handbook for Academic Quality Enhancement, Dublin Institute of Technology) is largely based on enabling programmes; for schools and other units to conduct self-evaluations, who then feed into processes which facilitate actions to appear on agendas of relevant committees. On paper, the system is highly sophisticated, but it is very time intensive at all levels and this militates against its effective implementation. It is often felt that the informal systems and culture that develops around the quality assurance system are more influential in enhancing quality and that this is then verified through the formal quality systems. Informal, in this case, refers to direct communication between individuals including students, staff and others. This is perhaps an example of how a quality culture has developed, but this can inevitably lead to the development of different cultures and sub-cultures.

Attitudes and Policies in respect of Second and Third Marking

DIT does not generally conduct second or third marking, other than by the external examiner. The exception would tend to be for major capstone work such as the final year project. This is not to say that quality assurance is not rigorous. There are multiple checks and balances throughout the system which can and do capture issues. This includes student feedback, student representation on Program committees and College Board, satisfaction surveys, monitoring of marks and grades by College Board, the development of reflective quality action plans by Programme committees and College Board and so on.

Teaching loads are a major issue in the IOT sector in Ireland. The current contract for Assistant Lecturers, with the addition of hours recently agreed (Croke Park and Haddington Road agreements) have resulted in staff teaching for 20-21 hours per week. The contract for lecturers is 18-19 hours. Teaching loads are regularly discussed as a concern, in particular when viewed alongside increased student numbers and the greater diversity of needs among the student population.

Diminution in Programme Standards

In viewing quality as *fitness for purpose*, DIT and the Irish education system are producing the type of graduates required. There is a concern, which is largely expressed in the Report of National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, that Irish higher education needs to stop developing programmes, schools and institutions independently of each other and that a high level system view is required for the whole provision in the sector. A number of initiatives in Higher Education are in place, including the proposal for the reduction in the number of Institutions and the development of the Technology University as a new type of institution and the recent work by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education on the alignment of institutional initiatives (Department of Education and Skills, Ireland).

Conclusions

The need for establishing and upholding quality in tertiary level education is paramount no matter where a programme is being offered. However, the variations in education systems that have developed and evolved in different countries and cultures, have given rise to a range of priorities and standards. For provision of quality education in Singapore, focus must be on a national policy with a single uniform rigid and robust quality procedure. This can only be

achieved if the CPE establishes quality standards for the private colleges that are equivalent to those of the best universities such as the NUS. This would mirror the QA insisted on by QQI in Ireland. Subsequently, it is imperative that these standards are monitored and maintained. If the current situation remains unchanged, the high reputation of Singaporean tertiary education may be jeopardised. There are numerous examples in other countries where a diminution in academic standards has ultimately worsened the national reputation of higher education, as highlighted by Philip G. Albach in the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education.

However, if a robust quality standard can be instigated and applied to private colleges, eventually the quality of the programmes and the reputation that is engendered will become a selling point both nationally and internationally. Despite the economic priorities of the private colleges, lecturers must be responsible for ensuring that students attain learning outcomes in the disciplines they are studying that are unambiguously measured, rather than them merely assembling marks for students through evaluations that are not credible. A move away from casualisation in respect of employing academics would offer them protection and positively influence teaching standards.

Solid criteria-based assessments are key to strengthening assessments in higher education programmes and ensuring reliable outcomes for students and prospective employers. QA must be in place, second marking of student's scripts and, if necessary third marking, should be universally introduced in Singapore. These measures are major requirements to establish and deliver quality education. As stated by Toh (2012, p.8), Singapore is considered to be the Global Schoolhouse. However, to sustain this brand and position, a pivotal role has to be played by the CPE and private education providers at the tertiary level, where it must be

ensured that delivering and maintaining quality remains the central objective of tertiary education stakeholders.

The Irish national strategy for higher education complies with the key point that ‘the simple acquisition of knowledge is not enough to count as an education’. Private education in Ireland has many of the weaknesses of the system applied in Singapore, though accreditation militates against glaring abuses of the system. It is taken for granted that Irish students must be equipped with generic skills like analytic reasoning, critical thinking, the ability to generate fresh ideas and the practical application of theory, as part of their academic qualification. Assessments would be strengthened by greater adoption of second marking of coursework and examinations. Higher teaching loads are bound to diminish the time available to ensure that adequate student assessment takes place. However, Irish higher education offers great flexibility and responsiveness to student needs, though there remains concern that some undergraduate programmes have become too fragmented and this curtails the ability to achieve independent learning. The national quality framework has been working to develop a real ‘quality culture’ through comprehensive reviews of the internal quality systems of higher education institutes.

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